
NORTH AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

21 March 2023

Cabinet

Title: Home Office Asylum Dispersal

Purpose: To advise Cabinet of the Home Office's plans for asylum dispersal across the United Kingdom and highlight the potential impact for North Ayrshire, taking into consideration the humanitarian resettlement schemes already being supported.

Recommendation: That Cabinet:

- i. notes the support being provided within North Ayrshire across the various humanitarian resettlement schemes.
- ii. notes the current pressure on Housing and wider services.
- iii. notes the Home Office rollout of a 'full dispersal' model for asylum seekers across the UK and the implications this has for North Ayrshire.
- iv. agrees that the Council is not in a position to offer social rented housing as part of the wider dispersal programme.
- v. approves the approach taken by Council officers to support Mears with the asylum dispersal programme by working in partnership through the North Ayrshire Refugee Task Force.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. North Ayrshire is currently supporting several humanitarian / resettlement programmes in relation to the evacuation from Afghanistan, various Ukrainian visa routes, Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Young People and the UK Resettlement Scheme (Legacy of the Syrian Resettlement Scheme).
- 1.2 Given the extreme pressure on asylum accommodation in the south of England resulting from the significant and sustained increase in asylum arrivals, the Home Office has redesigned its long-term approach for the asylum dispersal programme. The 'full dispersal' model includes regional/ national asylum seeker allocations, aligned to their UK population share.
- 1.3 Based on assumed UK arrivals of 100,000 by December 2023, the population share for Scotland amounts to 9,000 asylum seekers, with the allocation for North Ayrshire being 111 arrivals to be accommodated over a two-year period. However, it should be noted that the number of asylum seekers arriving in the UK on an annual basis is continuing to grow, which means the North Ayrshire share is subject to change.
- 1.4 The dispersal of asylum seekers across North Ayrshire will have significant implications

in relation to housing, health, education and other support services, alongside staffing and financial resources.

2. Background

- 2.1 A letter from the Minister for Safe and Legal Migration, Kevin Foster MP, was sent to all local authorities in April 2022 informing councils of changes being made to the asylum system in order to move away from the use of temporary contingency accommodation for asylum applicants. This change is intended to ensure a fairer distribution model is utilised across the country; this new approach is being described as 'full dispersal'.
- 2.2 All local authority areas in England, Scotland and Wales will participate in the new system of full dispersal to allow the move from hotels to more suitable dispersed accommodation.
- 2.3 The Mears Group have been contracted by the Home Office to implement and support the UK dispersal programme in Scotland. The proposed approach will require them to work in partnership with councils, under the auspices of the national Asylum Partnership Board, to identify suitable accommodation and deliver on the full dispersal plans.
- 2.4 For over twenty years Glasgow City Council has - both directly and indirectly - supported asylum dispersal in the city. It remains, by a considerable margin, the largest host authority for asylum applicants in the UK, with well over 5,000 people currently being accommodated in the city. The Home Office and Mears commenced an initial phase of widening dispersal to councils neighbouring Glasgow during Summer 2022.
- 2.5 In November 2022 COSLA Leaders agreed that any widening of dispersal would need to take place across all 32 local authorities on a proportional and equitable basis.
- 2.6 This approach will allocate a proportionate share of the additional c. 4,000 bed spaces that the Home Office has allocated for Scotland across 31 councils. This is on the basis that Glasgow already has a disproportionate share of asylum applicants, reflecting its position as the largest dispersal authority in the UK.
- 2.7 The North Ayrshire share based on the proportion of the population, discounting Glasgow, is 2.78%; this amounts to 111 asylum seekers arriving over a two-year period.
- 2.8 The roll out pertains to asylum seekers who have been assessed as having grounds to make an asylum application, with temporary provision being made for up to 18 months whilst the asylum process is undertaken. Should an asylum seeker's application be approved, they will be awarded the status of refugee, giving them the right to remain in the country and to access housing and welfare benefits.

The impact of asylum dispersal on local authorities

- 2.9 Mears, as the Home Office contractor, is responsible for procuring accommodation. They are required to work in partnership with local authorities to ensure that they understand the local area including regeneration regions, particular characteristics of a neighbourhood, service provision across the local authority, areas of challenge, suitable properties for procurement and possible opportunities within registered social landlord

and local authority housing stock that are underutilised.

- 2.10 Mears mainly procure private rental accommodation; however they are interested in any other options available in a local area including hotels, care homes and buildings which can be reprovioned.
- 2.11 As Mears identifies properties for procurement, they will liaise with both the local authority and Police Scotland, as part of the procurement protocol which needs to be followed for each property.
- 2.12 Mears has already commenced procurement activity in some council areas, as well as operating 'contingency accommodation' (hotels) in Perth and Kinross, Falkirk, Edinburgh, Renfrewshire, Glasgow, Inverclyde and South Lanarkshire.
- 2.13 Mears has confirmed that there are currently 6,000 asylum seekers within the Scottish system and they have already secured 79 bedspaces of their 2,500 Scottish target for the calendar year 2023. They have a further 250 units in the development pipeline, 9 of which are within North Ayrshire.
- 2.14 An Asylum Partnership Board chaired by Glasgow City Council has been set up for local authorities to understand the legal processes and to share emerging best practice and discuss arising issues.
- 2.15 Until March 2023, any bedspaces Mears procures will attract funding for the local authority of £3,500. This is a one-off payment per bedspace and can be used by the local authority as required. The aim of the funding is to provide support to services that are impacted by the widening of dispersal. COSLA are continuing to work with the Home Office to ensure there is sustainable funding beyond March 2023 which reflects the true cost of asylum to a local authority.

Rights of asylum seekers

- 2.16 Asylum seekers have no recourse to public funds; therefore they are not entitled to mainstream benefits and housing except in exceptional circumstances. In addition, they do not have a right to work and are provided with £40.85 per week for food, clothing, and toiletries.
- 2.17 Local authorities have a statutory duty, as they would with anyone moving into the area, to provide any social care and social work support to asylum seekers if needed and provide accessible education for children within asylum seeking families.
- 2.18 Local health partners (NHS and HSCPs) have a statutory duty to provide appropriate health care to asylum seekers; this includes registration with a GP.
- 2.19 Mears is considering how they can link in with partners to support integration and support. This will include guidance on accessing ESOL, community support and orientation and access to religious activities. Mears is keen to work with Police Scotland, local authorities and third sector partners to ensure that any issues of community cohesion are addressed quickly.

2.20 Asylum seekers will stay in accommodation until the outcome of their application has been finalised (including the appeal process). If their application is refused, they must return to their country of origin; support and accommodation will be discontinued after 21 days. If their application is approved, they have the same rights as all other refugees including access to benefits and housing; asylum support ends after 28 days, with the duty being passed to local authorities and wider partners.

What does the asylum dispersal programme mean for North Ayrshire?

2.21 Since 2015 the Council and community planning partners have supported a total of 211 households, comprising of 596 individuals, to resettle in North Ayrshire across the various humanitarian programmes, broken down as follows:

- 2015 - Afghan Locally Engaged Staff Ex Gratia Scheme – 6 households (26 individuals)
- 2015 to 2021 - Syrian Resettlement Programme (SRP) – 41 households (201 individuals)
- 2021 to date - UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS) – 2 households (10 individuals)
- 2021 to date - Afghan Relocation & Assistance Programme (ARAP) – 2 households (10 individuals)
- 2022 to date - Ukrainian resettlement schemes 160 households (349) individuals

2.22 The resettlement to date equates to 161 social rented tenancies being utilised to accommodate households across all schemes, 110 of which have been utilised since May 2022 to accommodate families fleeing the war in Ukraine.

2.23 The Scottish Government has a deadline of 31 March 2023 to rehouse the remaining 983 Ukrainian individuals currently residing on the MS Ambition cruise ship docked in the Clyde. Attention will then focus on assisting with the relocation programme from the Ms Victoria docked at Leith.

2.24 North Ayrshire Council currently support a Ukraine welcome hub at the Riverside Lodge, Irvine and officers are in discussions with the Scottish Government to develop further temporary accommodation at Boyle Street, Irvine to help accommodate Ukrainian displaced people leaving both ships.

2.25 In addition, the Council has an outstanding commitment to accommodate a further three ARAP (Afghan) and four UKRS families.

2.26 It is imperative that the Council maintains and protects its statutory homelessness duties. There is significant pressure on temporary accommodation for homeless people, with an average six month wait for an offer of permanent housing in the last nine months. The Homeless Service experienced extreme pressure in the provision of temporary accommodation at the beginning of February 2023, which almost resulted in a failure to meet our statutory responsibilities.

2.27 Mears aim to utilise private sector accommodation within North Ayrshire and are

working with both private landlords and investors to build up their accommodation portfolio. They have approached the Council to ascertain whether there is an opportunity to utilise Council and RSL social rented housing, however given the current pressures being managed by the Homeless service as detailed above, officers are not able to recommend this to Cabinet.

- 2.28 Asylum seekers subject to relocation via the full dispersal model will already have had their asylum application lodged and will therefore have a right to remain in the country pending full approval. Initial screening and health checks will have been undertaken prior to their arrival in North Ayrshire.
- 2.29 60% of all asylum applications are from single male households, therefore this is likely to be the profile of the majority of cases arriving in North Ayrshire. Mears have offered reassurance that they will provide Council officers with the profile information of asylum seekers arriving in North Ayrshire.
- 2.30 Should asylum seekers be awarded refugee status, they will have the right to make a homeless presentation locally and therefore be entitled to both temporary and permanent accommodation. This will increase the pressure on housing detailed above.
- 2.31 There are significant resource pressures across North Ayrshire for key services, with GP demand outstripping clinical capacity in some areas and capacity pressures in some schools.
- 2.32 Council officers have provided Mears with an overview of the pressures across North Ayrshire. Mears have agreed that they will not pursue procuring accommodation on the island communities and that they will work with officers on a property-by-property basis on the mainland to ascertain suitability for use for the asylum dispersal programme.
- 2.33 Mears are currently screening three two-bedroom properties in North Ayrshire with a view to procuring them; two are in Irvine and the third is in Kilwinning. It is likely that each flat would accommodate three asylum seekers, amounting to the resettlement of 9 people against the year one target of 57.
- 2.34 Mears have confirmed that they are working to disperse asylum seekers across North Ayrshire, as opposed to having clusters of households in one area. They have also offered assurance that if an asylum placement breaks down for any reason, they can remove the asylum seeker with immediate effect, minimising the impact on the community.
- 2.35 Council officers are keen to engage with Mears in a positive and supportive manner and have invited them to have a space on the agenda at each North Ayrshire Refugee Task Force meeting. This will ensure that there is a strategic overview of emerging issues, with the ability to work in partnership to secure the best outcomes for asylum seekers.

3. Proposals

3.1 That Cabinet:

- i. notes the support being provided within North Ayrshire across the various humanitarian resettlement schemes.
- ii. notes the current pressure on Housing and wider services.
- iii. notes the Home Office rollout of a 'full dispersal' model for asylum seekers across the UK and the implications this has for North Ayrshire
- iv. agrees that the Council is not in a position to offer social rented housing as part of the wider dispersal programme.
- v. approves the approach taken by Council officers to support Mears with the asylum dispersal programme by working in partnership to support the integration process through the Refugee Task Force.

4. Implications/Socio-economic Duty

Financial

- 4.1 Until March 2023, any asylum seeker placed into North Ayrshire will attract Home Office funding of £3500. The purpose of the funding is to provide support to services that are impacted by the widening of dispersal. COSLA are continuing to work with the Home Office to ensure that there is sustainable funding in place beyond March 2023 which reflects the true cost to the local authority.

Human Resources

- 4.2 Officers will monitor the impact of the asylum dispersal programme on existing staffing resources. Should additional resources be required, the costs will be met from the UK Government funding allocated for this purpose.

Legal

- 4.3 The UK is a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention relating to the status of refugees and is obliged to consider properly any application for asylum made in the UK by a person who claims to be fleeing persecution.
- 4.4 Asylum is a matter reserved to the UK Government and handled by the Home Office. Scottish Government and local authorities are responsible for devolved matters, including access to essential services like healthcare and education, that enable the integration of refugees and asylum seekers in Scottish communities.

Equality/Socio-economic

- 4.5 Should the asylum seekers be granted full refugee status, they will be entitled to secure employment. Many of the refugees and displaced people who have settled within North Ayrshire to date have arrived with a variety of skills and attributes which enrich our communities, and, in a local context, this may help to address some of the demographic challenges within North Ayrshire.

Climate Change and Carbon

4.6 None

Key Priorities

- 4.7 All asylum seekers arriving in North Ayrshire will be supported to resettle here in the short and - subject to award of refugee status – long term. This will support delivery of the Council Plan priorities of 'Active and strong communities' and People and communities are safe'

Community Wealth Building

4.8 None

5. Consultation

- 5.1 Discussions have taken place at the North Ayrshire Refugee Task Force to ensure all partners are aware of the likely implications of the asylum dispersal programme.

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For further information please contact **Janeine Barrett, Senior Manager (Homelessness and Community Safety)**, on janeinebarrett@north-ayrshire.gov.uk

Background Papers

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